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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S DEMOCRATIC INITIATIVE: MORE THAN WORDS?

REF: ANKARA 1468

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Interior Minister Besir Atalay has announced that the as-yet unrevealed Democratic Initiative will exit its first "debate" phase and progress to the second "concrete step" phase after the Prime Minister returns from a visit to Iraq on October 15. Details of the project remain elusive, and a number of embassy contacts argue that rather than deliver a package, the government may prefer that the initiative remain an amorphous process gradually unrolled over a number of years. Though this method would allow for flexibility, it could meet resistance on the part of an opposition unable or unwilling to accept the project in its entirety, and would leave no provision for the continuance of the project were the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to be voted out of office in the future. In any event, for maximum benefit, either approach would require support from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which appears reluctant to give it. End summary.

SOUND AND FURY; CUE THE SIGNIFICANCE

12. (C) The theme "Together We Are All Turkey," currently popping up on billboards around Ankara and prominently featured as the main slogan for AKP's October 3 party congress, encapsulates the optimism of the government in selling the idea of wider democratization -- particularly for ethnic and religious groups that do not have legal minority status -- as its main domestic agenda in the 2009-2010 legislative year. Yet so far the government's rhetoric has not been matched with substance.

13. (C) Trumpeting the theme at the conference, Prime Minister Erdogan emphasized that citizens of Turkey, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or ideological background, should be valued and treated equally. He emphasized how poor Turkish culture would be without the influences of its diversity, enumerating writers from Alevi (Haci Bektas and Pir Sultan Abdal), Kurdish (Ahmet Kaya and Said-i Nursi), and socialist (Nazim Hikmet and Cem Karaca) backgrounds. (Note: The mention of Said-i Nursi, mentor of religious leader Fethullah Gulen, elicited an impressive round of applause among the AKP delegates and other participants in the congress. End Note.) Erdogan has since promised to conduct a tour of Turkey promoting the initiative at public venues. However, the party board tasked with developing the Kurdish initiative issued a bland anodyne

statement to the congress, reasserting the value that ethnic diversity and role democratization would play in ending ethnic conflict without detailing exactly how the initiative would proceed.

14. (C) The optimism of the congress was not consistently reflected in our discussions with officials close to the project. Ahmet Iyimaya, a caffeine-driven MP from Amasya and expert on constitutional law, expressed concern that the package would fail. He told us that the Prime Minister, Interior Minister, and other pertinent officials had finalized what would be in the package, but were concerned that the opposition would not support it. The chance of constitutional amendments passing was "hic, sifir (never, zero)" and therefore were unlikely to even be proposed to the current Parliament. He predicted that Atalay would possibly not bring a coherent package to Parliament at all. Instead, his presentation to Parliament would be a restatement of rhetoric that had already been reported -- that the path to eliminating the PKK and developing the country is through democratization and the elimination of unfair treatment of minorities -- and that the package would then be brought to vote in unconnected pieces.

15. (C) Eyup Tepe, Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior, told us that Minister Atalay would likely brief members of parliament on the initiative beginning in the third week of October, but that the political situation for a briefing of the whole of Parliament may never exist. He, too, mentioned a step-by-step approach for passage, explaining that the committee on the initiative would brief

ANKARA 00001475 002 OF 003

PM Erdogan who would then make piecemeal decisions on a way forward.

CHP PLAYING HARD TO GET

16. (C) Our talks with pro-initiative opposition member Mesut Deger reinforced Iyimaya's pessimism. Deger had been preparing a report for the Republican People's Party (CHP) making suggestions on how a democratization plan to solve the Kurdish issue could be achieved within CHP's redlines. The press announced on October 2 that the CHP had released Deger's report, but by the end of the weekend, CHP officials had disowned it, claiming that no such report even existed. On October 9, Deger gave us a copy of the report, telling us that it had been leaked to a pro-PKK website. The website unilaterally added several terms unacceptable to the CHP, including general amnesty for all PKK members other than Abdullah Ocalan and an immediate end to operations against the PKK. Deger insists that his original report did not include such language and that the edits were obvious fakes, inconsistent in tone and grammar from the remainder of the report. Deger would not speculate as to how the draft got to the press, claiming the only people to have had a copy were himself, Deniz Baykal, Murat Karayalcin, and one of Karayalcin's aides. (Note: We had previously met with other CHP members who proudly wielded what they claimed to have been Deger's report. It is unclear whether they indeed had his report or had instead a summary of previous CHP pronouncements in favor of increased democratization and accommodation for the Kurds. Furthermore, Eyup Tepe said that Deger had been working with the MoI to produce his report. He believed that the CHP report was closely aligned with Minister Atalay's goals, but that CHP was playing a political game that would, in the end, lead them not to support the initiative. End note.)

17. (C) The result of the leak of the doctored document was that the CHP board advised Baykal to distance the party from it unambiguously, considering even the legitimate parts of the document to be poisonous. Deger predicted that Baykal would reject uncategorically AKP's initiative: if it emerged as a package, he would be forced by the leaked report episode to reject it as a concession to terrorist demands, but if it

were to come to Parliament in inchoate pieces, he would be unable to support individual items without knowing what role they play in the whole. Deger was also pessimistic that Baykal would respond positively to an Erdogan letter requesting the two men meet to discuss the initiative. Baykal has to date accepted the invitation on the condition that the media cover the event to avoid press speculation that would follow a closed meeting. Tepe's assurance that CHP and AKP are meeting at the working level to reach an accommodation over the initiative, coupled by the optimism in meetings with us of highly-placed CHP leaders, such as Kemal Kilicdaroglu and Hakki Suha Okay, suggest that CHP support may still be in the cards, but perhaps at the high price of the general lifting of Parliamentary immunity or concessions over ambiguities in procedures for presidential elections to be held in 2012.

A ROAD PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

18. (C) Comment: A combination of AKP being unwilling to detail its intentions for the initiative coupled with a CHP reluctance to relinquish state control over anything to individuals, and, perhaps more likely, to hand AKP a political success on a platter, may eventually undermine the Democratic Initiative. In a society that has become pointedly polarized between the government and the opposition, CHP support would be key to allaying nationalist concerns that the AKP is laying the ground for increased rather than decreased tension. Without CHP support, the initiative could prove counter-productive, creating more tension, rather than less. Deniz Baykal could indeed focus on short-term political gains (despite having championed many of the proposed reforms himself in the past) leaving AKP with the unenviable job of trying to convince a stalwart opposition unassisted.

JEFFREY

ANKARA 00001475 003 OF 003

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